

Moral Convictions and Helping Behavior: The Role of Sentimentality

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PSB3E-BT15: Bachelor Thesis

Group number:01

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May 26th, 2023

Abstract

This study aims to investigate whether and when moral conviction relates to helping behavior. Our study is comprised of three hypotheses (H): (1) moral convictions are positively associated with helping behavior; (2) sentimentality is positively associated with helping behavior; and (3) sentimentality moderates the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior such that the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior is stronger for individuals who score higher on sentimentality.

We used a correlational study design and conducted an online questionnaire via Qualtrics. The study was focused on the context the Iran Revolution which occurred in 2022, regarding its implications for gender equality. The results of the study indicated that H1 and H2 were supported, which means that moral convictions as well as sentimentality were positively associated with helping behavior. H3 was not supported as the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior was not stronger for individuals who scored higher on sentimentality.

This study fills an important gap in the literature on prior research on moral convictions and factors that motivate participation in helping behavior. Theoretical implications of the study findings are discussed in this thesis.

Keywords: *moral convictions, social activism, helping behavior, sentimentality, Iran revolution*

Moral Convictions and Helping Behavior: The Role of Sentimentality

Gender inequality can be defined as “the legal, social, and cultural situation where an individual’s sex/gender is a determining factor for an individual’s rights as well as dignity. It reflects in unequal access to or enjoyment of their rights and perpetuates social and cultural stereotypes.” (European Institute of Gender Equality).¹ Throughout history, women have faced injustices related to biological sex gender identity (e.g., women not being able to vote). As one example, Iranian women are to abide by a certain dress code, that requires them to wear what is known as a hijab (or head scarf).

In the recent past, a young Iranian woman named Mahsa Amini was taken into custody for incorrectly wearing her hijab and later died under suspicious circumstances (McGrath, 2022). Her case triggered different forms of activism (Louis et al., 2019), with protests occurring against gender inequality by people in and outside Iran. Other people expressed solidarity for what happened to Mahsa Amini, such as helping toward Iranian people. Women across the globe showed their solidarity to Iranian women through the symbolize of cutting their hair as a protest to the Iranian government (*Iran Protests: Women Around the World Cut Their Hair*, 2022). Indeed, it seemed that such expressions of solidarity were likely infused with moral meaning (Kende et al., 2017; Van Zomeren et al., 2012).

In this study, we investigated whether and when moral conviction is associated with helping behavior. Particularly, we investigated the personality trait of sentimentality which refers to an individual’s ability to feel stronger bonds with others e.g., empathy (Lee & Ashton., 2009), and whether it plays a moderating role in this relationship.

Moral Convictions

¹ See <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/search?ts=gender%20inequality>

Moral convictions are defined as an individual's strong attitudes that reflect absolute beliefs about whether something is perceived as wrong or right, moral, or immoral (e.g., "I strongly support gender equality because it's a matter of principle", Skitka et al., 2005). According to the domain theory of attitude (Skitka, 2010; Skitka et al., 2021), strong attitudes embedded in moral conviction are different from similar constructs, such as attitudes embedded in preferences and conventions. Attitudes grounded in preferences are subjective and entail an individual's personal taste and tolerance (e.g., "I support gender equality because I feel like it), whereas attitudes embedded in conventions reflect coordination rules, societal norms and depend on the group or authority figure (e.g., "I support gender equality because all my friends do it"). However, attitudes grounded in moral convictions are experienced as a moral imperative, absolute, and universal, are believed to be factual, have a compelling motive, justify the drive for action, and can evoke strong emotions such as anger (Skitka et al., 2005; Rozin et al., 1999).

Moral convictions motivate people to act on their behalf and, thus, can predict important social behaviors that can drive social change. For instance, research has shown that moral convictions predict voting, volunteering, and collective action (Kende et al., 2017; Van Zomeren et al., 2012). However, past research has mainly focused on how moral convictions may relate to activist support (e.g., collective action) and we know little about how it can relate to more benevolent forms of support (i.e., support that has the goal of reducing other's suffering; (Louis et al., 2019), such as helping behavior.

Moral Convictions and Helping Behavior

In times of crisis people tend to band together and offer their services, skills, and time (e.g., volunteering) to help improve the situation of disadvantaged groups (Louis et al., 2019; Thomas & McGarty., 2017). Kende and colleagues (2017) have suggested and shown that moral convictions may be a reason that motivates people to engage in helping behavior

toward others. In their study, they found that engaging in helping behavior may be a means to express moral convictions among a sample of volunteers in the context of the Hungarian refugee crisis. One theoretical explanation for this is that when people are confronted with a violation that goes against their moral convictions, they feel the moral need to act in a way that is consistent with their moral convictions and who they are (Sabucedo et al., 2018; Van Zomeren et al., 2012; 2018). This consistency will help reduce dissonance between their attitudes and actions (Festinger, 1957). Therefore, people will engage in helping behavior to support and be consistent with their moral convictions. In this research, we seek to **replicate** the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior.

The Moderating Role of Sentimentality

Even though there is already evidence that moral convictions can predict helping behavior (Kende et al., 2017), we know little about the conditions under which this effect can occur. We propose that the personality trait of sentimentality may make this relationship stronger. Indeed, some research suggests that empathy (Stephan & Finlay, 1999) helps people connect with others and predict positive attitudes and behaviors, such as towards others (Batson et al., 1997; Tarrant et al., 2009). People who are very sentimental may also feel the need to engage in actions that bring them closer to others, such as helping. In this research, we expect that sentimentality is also associated with helping behavior.

Moreover, we expect that sentimentality would moderate this relationship. Particularly, the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior would be stronger for people who are highly sentimental. This is because when exposed to a violation of one's moral convictions, highly sentimental people may be more likely to connect with the victims of such a violation and feel motivated to engage in actions that help them alleviate their suffering, such as helping (Kende et al., 2017).

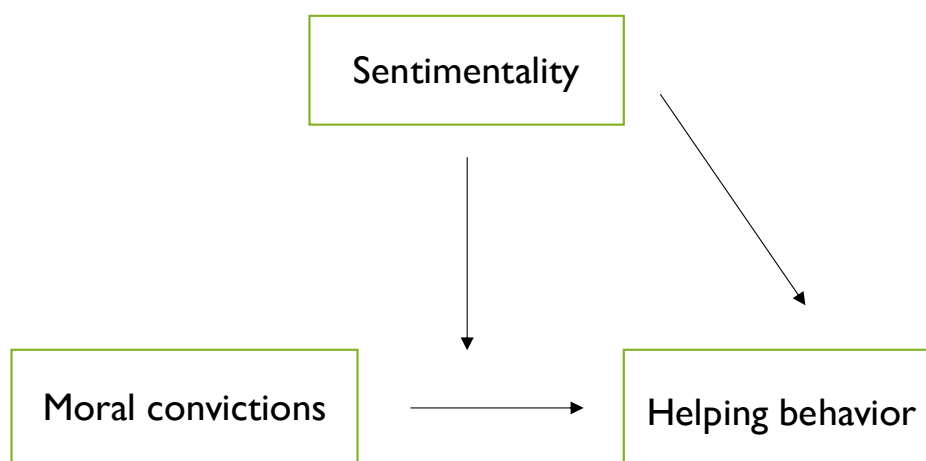
This expectation stems from the understanding that highly sentimental individuals also tend to have stronger emotional responses when their moral convictions are violated. Hence when a transgression not in line with their beliefs (i.e., gender inequality) they feel more emotionally connected with the victim and experience empathy (Davis et al., 2020). Kende et al.'s (2017) research supports this reasoning and suggests that an individual's empathetic concern to alleviate a victim's suffering fuels their willingness to engage in acts of helping behavior. Therefore, our expectation is that sentimentality will act as a moderator in the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior.

Present Study

This present study aims to investigate the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior, and whether sentimentality plays a moderating role in this relationship, in the context of the women's rights movement in Iran, known as The Iran Revolution. We hypothesize that (1) moral convictions are positively associated with helping behavior, (2) sentimentality is positively associated with helping behavior, and (3) sentimentality moderates the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior such that the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior is stronger for individuals who score high on sentimentality. This research model is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Research model



Method

Participants and Design

Two hundred and twenty-seven first year psychology Bachelor students at the University of Groningen participated in an online study via Qualtrics. Participants were recruited via SONA, which is an internal participant database of the University of Groningen. Participants received 0.4 “SONA” credits for their participation. Our sample consisted of 52 males, 171 females, and 4 other participants who chose to not indicate their gender. They ranged in age between 17 and 35 ($M = 20.08$, $SD = 2.11$). From the 227 participants who participated in this study, 139 were from the Dutch-language Bachelor program, and 83 were from the English-language Bachelor program, and 5 participants stated that they were from another program not indicated in the response options provided. This study employed a correlational study design, where moral conviction is the independent variable, helping behavior is the dependent variable, and sentimentality is the moderating variable.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee for the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Science of the University of Groningen. Study participants responded to all questions in English. Participants were asked to give informed consent and were informed that all data were going to be collected and analyzed according to the General Data Protection Regulations.

In the first part of the study, participants completed a questionnaire about their general attitudes and moral convictions regarding gender equality, racial inequality, and human-made climate change. The target issue of moral convictions was gender equality, while the other two topics on racial inequality and human-made climate change were used as filler questions to mask the true purpose of the study. In the second part of the study, we briefly introduced the context of Mahsa Amini’s death and the 2022 I ran Revolution, and participants filled out

questions that measured helping toward women in Iran. Next, the participants were asked to complete questions that measured sentimentality (e.g., “I feel like crying when I see other people crying”), and other questions that measured criteria that were not relevant for the hypothesis of this study. After completing the questionnaire, the study participants were asked to provide some basic socio-demographic information (e.g., their gender and age) and were debriefed about the intentions of the study.

Measures

Moral Convictions

We first measured participants general attitudes toward gender equality. Participants indicated “the extent to which they supported or opposed gender inequality” by using a 7-point Likert scale (*1-strongly opposed to 7-strongly support*). To measure moral conviction, participants were asked a series of questions: 1) “How much is your opinion on gender inequality...”; 2) “How much is your opinion on gender a reflect of your core moral beliefs and convictions?”; 3) “How much is your opinion on gender connected to your beliefs about fundamental right and wrong?”; 4) “How much is your opinion on gender based on moral principle?” Cronbach’s alpha for moral convictions was 0.875 ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 1.17$) which indicates that the moral convictions measure was reliable as a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.7 and above is acceptable.

Helping Behavior

Helping behavior was assessed in the context of the Iranian Revolution. We measured participants willingness to engage in a variety of helping behaviors in the context of gender equality in the context of the Iranian Revolution (adapted from Kende et al., 2017).

Participants reported their willingness to 1) “donate 15 Euro to an organization that is fighting for gender equality in Iran, 2) lend my social media platform account to an Iranian gender equality activist to help them spread awareness about the issue, 3) offer emotional

support via an internet platform to Iranian people protesting for gender equality” and 4) take part in a fundraising project to support women’s right activists in Iran”by using a 7-point Likert scale (*1-not at all to 7-very much*). Cronbach's alpha for helping behavior was 0.849 ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.54$).

Sentimentality

Sentimentality was measured by using the HEXCO personality inventory (Lee & Ashton, 2009). Participants indicated on a 5-point Likert scale (*1-strongly agree to 5-strongly disagree*) how much each statement applied to them: 1) I feel like crying when I see other people crying; 2) I feel strong emotions when someone close to me is going away for a long time; 3) I remain unemotional even in situations where most people get very sentimental (reverse coded); 4) When someone I know well is unhappy, I can almost feel that person’s pain myself. Cronbach's alpha for sentimentality was 0.767 ($M = 3.85, SD = 0.92$)

Results

Preliminary Analysis

We first checked whether the assumptions for multiple linear regression were met (i.e., normality, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, and independence of observation). The P-P Plot check for normality indicated that this assumption was met as the residuals followed a straight line (see Figure 1 in Appendix). Additionally, the P-P plot to determine whether homoscedasticity (or equal or similar variances) was present, displayed no clear pattern, indicating that the data was homoscedastic (see Figure 2 in Appendix). The residuals were independent as the Durbin-Watson value = 1.86. Lastly, the absence of multicollinearity in the data was confirmed by the VIF scores being below 10 (1.06) and the tolerance scores above 0.25 (0.94).

Descriptive statistics, correlations and reliability for variables are reported in Table 1. All variables were significantly and positively correlated with each other.

Table 1

Mean, standard deviation, reliability, and correlations for all study variables

Variable	M	SD	α	2	3
1. Moral convictions	5.70	1.17	0.875	0.421**	0.262**
2. Helping behavior	4.26	1.54	0.849		0.257**
3. Sentimentality	3.85	0.92	0.767		

Note: Range of Likert scale for the variables “moral convictions” and “helping behavior” = 1-7 and 1-5 for the variable “sentimentality; ** $p < .001$

Hypothesis Testing

Prior to running a multiple linear regression analysis, we centered the independent variable (i.e., moral convictions about gender inequality), and the moderator (i.e., sentimentality) We then computed an interaction between our centered variables moral convictions and sentimentality by multiplying the two variables together. This was done as it helps to create a visual representation as to whether sentimentality had a moderating role in the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior. The overall model summary showed that 20% of the variance of helping behavior was significantly explained by the variable’s moral convictions and sentimentality ($R^2 = 0.202$, $F = 18.79$, $p < .001$).

The first hypothesis was that moral convictions was positively associated with helping behavior. Results indicated that moral convictions were significantly and positively associated with helping behavior ($\beta = 0.402$, $t(223) = 6.28$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = .16$, 95% CI [0.362;0.693]). The second hypothesis was that sentimentality was positively associated with helping behavior. The results supported this hypothesis, as we found a positive and significant association between sentimentality and helping behavior ($\beta = 0.151$, $t(223)$

=2.433, $p < .001$, $f^2 = .048$, 95% CI [0.048;0.458]). The final hypothesis proposed that sentimentality moderates the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior. The finding revealed that the interaction effect was not significant ($\beta = 0.076$, $t(223) = 1.212$, $p < .227$, $f^2 = .001$, 95% CI [-0.052;0.220]), meaning that our third hypothesis was not supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether and when moral conviction is associated with helping behaviour, and whether sentimentality may moderate this relationship. This was investigated in the context of the Iran Revolution, which was a protest that occurred in 2022. The three hypotheses tested in this study were: 1) moral convictions are positively associated with helping behavior, (2) sentimentality is positively associated with helping behavior, and (3) sentimentality moderates the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior such that the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior is stronger for individuals who scored higher on sentimentality.

There are three key findings of the present research. We found that moral convictions were positively associated with helping behavior, which supported the first hypothesis. We also found support for the second hypothesis in that sentimentality was positively associated with helping behavior. Lastly, we found the sentimentality did not moderate the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior, which means our third hypothesis was not supported. However, it was found that the dependent variable (helping behavior) was positively associated with both sentimentality and moral convictions.

Theoretical implications

This study has three main theoretical implications of our findings. The first implication is that we found support that moral convictions are positively associated with social activism e.g., helping behavior in a different context, the Iran Revolution of 2022. This replicates past research as our results indicate that moral convictions were associated with helping behavior

(Kende et al, 2017). As an individual's values are violated, they defend their moral convictions and engage in social activism. This is due to the need to stay consistent with one's values and beliefs. This phenomenon was supported by the results of our study. We found support for the association between moral convictions and social activism in the context of the Iran Revolution of 2022. Kende et al., (2017) conducted a study within the context of the refugee crisis in the summer of 2015 that mobilized thousands of volunteers in Hungary. The results of this paper indicated that in times of crisis people engage in social activism, in this case volunteering. Therefore, people are willing to engage in social activism in different contexts. Another implication that we discovered was that we did not find support for the moderating role of sentimentality in the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior.

There are a few potential explanations as to why sentimentality did not act as a moderator between moral conviction and helping behavior. The first possibility is that there could have been the presence of a lurking variable that we did not control for i.e., another personality trait. This is a possible explanation as sentimentality, is a personality trait measured by the HEXCO personality inventory and falls under the domain Emotionality. As empathy and sentimentality have a close relationship it is possible the sentimentality may have been overshadowed by empathy as they have similarities. (Lee & Ashton., 2009). Hence why no moderation was observed. Additionally, the participants included in our study could have had not much variance of sentimentality, which would have affected the detection of a moderating effect., therefore a larger sample is needed.

However, we found support for the association between sentimentality and helping behavior. This association strengthens the argument that individuals who score higher in sentimentality are more inclined to alleviate another person's suffering and therefore engage in helping behavior. This finding highlights the need to further investigate individual

emotional traits and their potential influence on helping behavior. This association adds to existing research that suggests that altruistic behaviors are motivated by empathic emotion (Batson, 1981; Miyazono, 2021).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study consisted of three potential limitations. The first limitation of the study was that our sample only consisted of first year psychology Bachelor students. For future research a more diverse sample size would aid in better generalizability. This would provide a better understanding of how individuals from different backgrounds may respond and behave in similar contexts. The second limitation was that the findings were specific to the one context, the Iran Revolution. This is a limitation as the participants may have not had an affiliation to Iran and displayed allyship which is when advantaged groups support disadvantaged groups (Louis et al., 2019). Future research could potentially look at whether advantaged groups would influence the findings. The last limitation is that we measured behavioral intentions in the engagement of helping behavior. This is a limitation as we were unable to confirm whether participant's behavioral intention to engage in helping (e.g., donating money) would translate into an actual donation. In the future it would be useful to measure actual behaviors rather than behavioral intentions.

Conclusion

The present study has enhanced our understanding of the relationship between moral convictions, helping behavior and the moderating role of sentimentality. Our study results indicate that moral convictions and sentimentality are positively associated with engagement in helping behavior. However, sentimentality showed no role in moderating the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior. Our findings highlighted that moral convictions seem to drive helping behavior even when it is not in people's current contexts. We hope that the current research will stimulate further investigations on the relationship

between moral convictions and benevolent forms of support i.e., helping, as well as investigate other important factors that drive benevolent behavior.

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Appendix

Figure 1

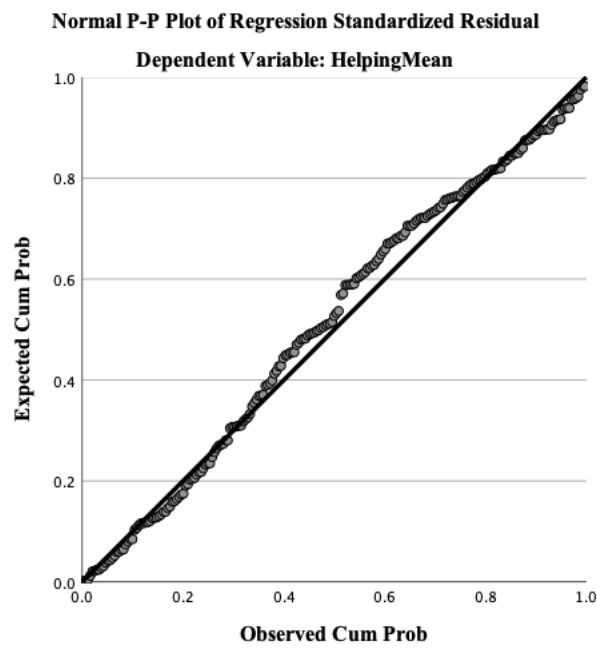


Figure 2

